

Third Sunday of Advent (B) – Gaudete, Be Happy

The special theme of today's Liturgy is God's gift of joy. In the Gospel the Jesus says to us: *Happy is the one who keeps faith in me.*

Joy is not something that can be manufactured, organised, or worked up. Joy is the fruit of love. If we are to be people of joy then we must first be people of love. And love is a gift of God.

The love we are to express must first of all embrace our own selves. Love begins with myself.

Many people become sad and bitter because they feel they have been a disappointment to others – or to themselves. They look at themselves in a mirror and say: 'What have I got to offer anyone?' They look into their lives and reflect 'What have I got to show for it all?' They are conscious of personal weaknesses, failed ambitions, broken dreams. Some people actually come to hate themselves.

This is partly because our present day society tells us that a person's worth is measured by the possessions they acquire, or by the achievements they can list, or by the good looks/skills/ talents they possess.

So we are encouraged thereby to compare ourselves with one another – and, of course, we will always find ourselves wanting in one respect or another, perhaps in several respects. We then become envious, and miserable.

But the Gospel says that each of us has an **intrinsic** worth irrespective of anything we might have or do. We have a **radical** value. We are of infinite worth simply because we are. Each person is unique and precious in the eyes of God.

We should begin – or begin again – to treasure ourselves more. There is no one who is not of great worth no matter how wretched their condition, no matter what mess they have made of their lives so far.

If I grow in self-respect I will grow in self-confidence, and then I will become happier with myself - and better able to relate to others.

The love that begins by embracing myself must reach out to include others.

We have to cultivate a mutual respect in our relationships in which we recognise the dignity of each person no matter how humble, inadequate, or young, or old they may happen to be.

And no matter what mess they may have made of their lives so far.

Now we are approaching the season of Christmas and we find on all sides our secular society making strenuous efforts to work up a sense of 'good cheer'.

For the most part this amounts to a rather desperate, certainly saccharine, mix of sentiment and nostalgia decorated with tinsel and fairy lights and irrigated with an abundance of alcohol. This kind of 'cheer' is notable for its banality.

Whatever feelings of happiness are generated by all this hype they are superficial and short-lived. 'Christmas is always a big let-down; its not what its cracked up to be. Its OK for the kids, I suppose' – as someone remarked to me last year – as early as the evening of Christmas day!

A secular Christmas will always be a disappointment because it has lost its heart.

The heart of the Feast is love. It is love that generates joy - our love for our own personal selves; our love for one another. But above all else our recognition of the love in which God holds us.

This is the cause of, the principal reason for, our Christmas Celebrations – and we *should* celebrate: with music, dancing, good food and drink, lights and colour and spectacle! We were not born to be miserable for ever, but to be happy for ever in God's love, God's life. We should prepare ourselves for that true and lasting joy! Anticipate it!

We can look into our lives and see their poverty – maybe material poverty, more likely spiritual poverty – and the mess we may have made of them so far.

We may feel that life has shut its doors on us.

We may feel quite in the dark about what to do with ourselves, or left outside in the cold as 'the world passes us by'.

The message of Christmas is addressed to us in such desolation. God says 'I love you where you are - in whatever wretched stable you think you've ended up. I come into your world with my love. Put away your doubts and fears. Put away your guilt and self-blame and your shame. Put away your thoughts of weakness and failure. Put away any sense of being unworthy in my sights.

I am *Emmanuel* – 'God with you.' *Happy are those who keep faith in Me!*

May the love that is in the heart of God for us percolate a little more into our own hearts enabling us to be a little more loving of our own selves, and towards each other.

And as we grow in love we will grow in joy – for joy is the fruit of love, and love is the gift of God whose life is characterised by joy.